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CHAPTER 188

Massachusetts
Basic Skills
Testing
Program

March 1989

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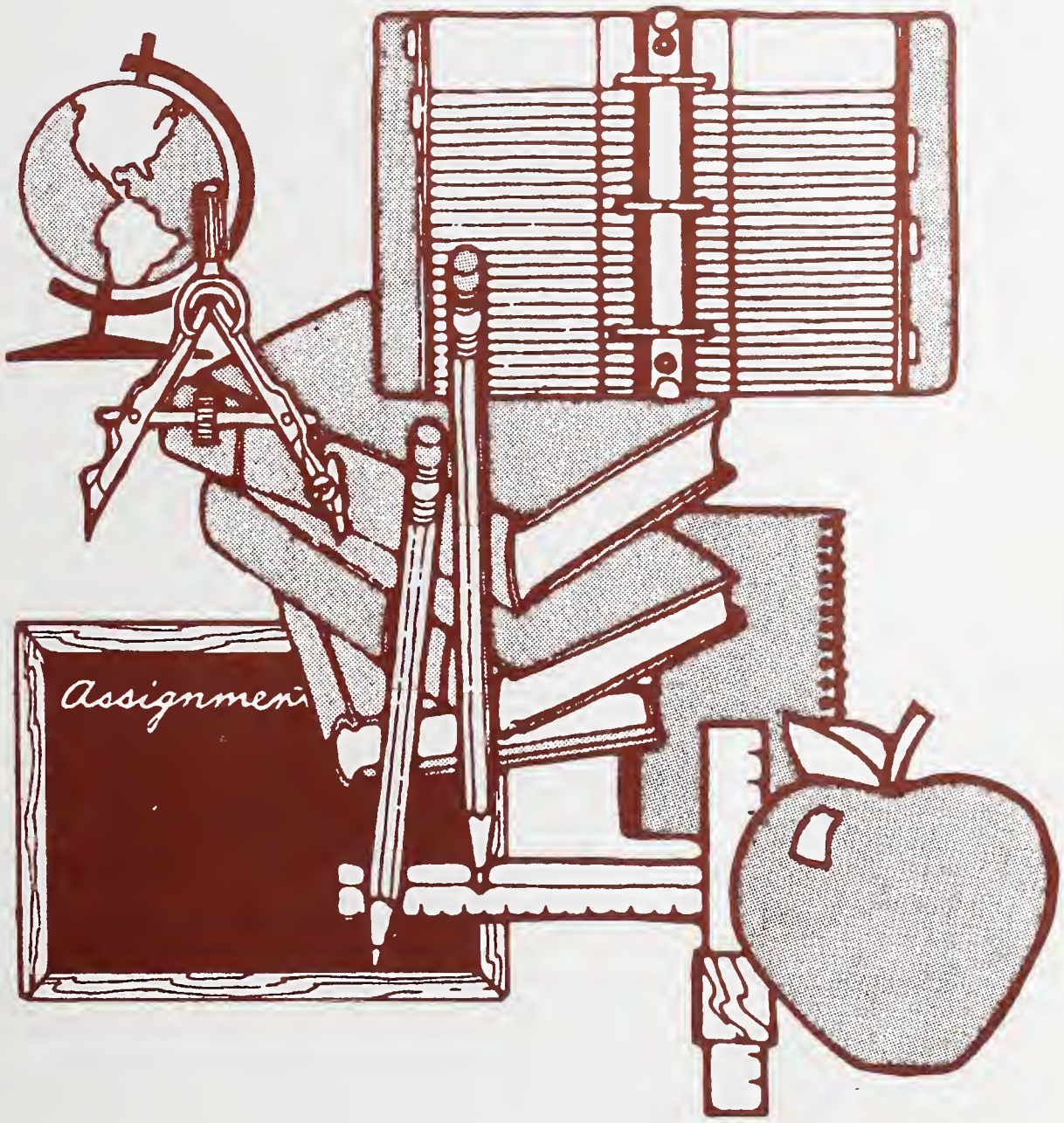
MASSACHUSETTS BASIC SKILLS TESTS:

1988 RESULTS



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CHAPTER 188

Massachusetts
Basic Skills
Testing
Program

MASSACHUSETTS BASIC SKILLS TESTS: 1988 RESULTS

March 1989

Massachusetts Department of Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 1988 report of the Basic Skills Testing Program, authorized under Chapter 188, summarizes the test performance of all third, sixth and ninth grade students tested in reading, mathematics and writing as well as the retesting of tenth grade students who failed one or more Basic Skills tests in 1987. The report provides comparisons with test performance in 1987 and examines the performance of students and schools considered to be at risk.

The purpose of Basic Skills testing is to identify students who have not mastered basic skills. In 1988, 167,872 elementary and secondary students, representing 93 percent of the total enrollment at grades 3, 6 and 9, were eligible for testing during October 1988. The percentages of students who met or exceeded the standards of 65 percent in reading and mathematics and the required levels of proficiency in writing are summarized below:

	Reading	Mathematics	Writing
Grade 3	94.8%	93.3%	93.2%
Grade 6	87.2%	91.9%	93.8%
Grade 9	85.5%	85.5%	90.0%

The vast majority of students at all grade levels demonstrated mastery of basic skills as well as higher passing rates in all subject areas compared to their 1987 counterparts. Despite slightly increased exemptions, the 1988 percentages of students passing all three tests showed significant increases over 1987 rates as summarized below:

	Percentages Passing All Three Tests	
	1987	1988
Grade 3	85.3%	87.5%
Grade 6	79.1%	82.8%
Grade 9	76.3%	78.6%

The regulations governing the testing program require that all ninth grade students not passing one or more of the Basic Skills tests must be retested in each subsequent year until they pass. In 1988, over 10,000 tenth grade students were tested; most were students who either failed or were absent from testing as ninth graders. A small number were transfer students.

Of those tested, 44 percent (about 4800 students) did not pass one or more tests. This group will be retested again in 1989.

In 1987, about 33,000 students (20 percent of those tested) did not pass one or more of the Basic Skills tests. In 1988, these figures decreased to 28,500 students (17 percent of those tested). A comparison of some student background characteristics with passing rates shows a number of associations as indicated below:

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS PASSING ALL THREE BASIC SKILLS TESTS

Student/Community Characteristics	Percentage of Students Passing All Three Tests
All Students	83%
Students in Cities	75%
Hispanic Students Who Attend School in Cities	52%
Students Whose Mothers Did Not Graduate From High School and Attend School in Cities	66%
STUDENTS WHOSE MOTHERS GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE AND WHO ATTEND SCHOOL IN ECONOMICALLY DEVELOPED SUBURBS	94%

In addition to high failure rates among certain demographic groups, many of these groups tend to be concentrated in certain schools or districts. For example, at grade 6, schools in urban communities enroll

- 66% of the students whose mothers did not graduate from high school;
- 82% of the Black and Hispanic students;
- over 90% of limited or non-English speaking students.

The Opportunity Schools, established by Chapter 727 of the Acts of 1987, were identified on the basis of 1987 Basic Skills performance. Schools whose passing rates were in the bottom 25 percent of all schools were targeted for assistance. Students in these schools are substantially more likely to have the demographic characteristics related to poor mastery of basic skills. While the 1988 results for students in the Opportunity Schools showed an improvement similar to that in other schools, the passing rate for these students continues to be double that of other students in the state.

Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE MASSACHUSETTS BASIC SKILLS TESTING PROGRAM

Between October 3 and 21, 1988, almost 170,000 public school students in grades 3, 6 and 9 were tested in reading, writing and mathematics in the third annual administration of the Massachusetts Basic Skills Testing Program. The program, mandated by Chapter 188 of the Acts of 1985, was established to identify students who have not achieved mastery of the basic skills needed to participate successfully in regular class work in those subjects.

The 1988 test administration was the second one completed under a state standard of 65 percent correct in the multiple choice reading and mathematics tests and a level of skill identified by the Massachusetts Board of Education as the standard for writing. The 1987 and 1988 results provide the first comparable statewide basic skills data available. Comparisons of these results are discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

The 1988 testing also marked the first time that secondary students who had not previously passed any Basic Skills test(s) were required to take or retake the test(s) until they met the state standard. This requirement, part of the Regulations governing the program, involved the testing or retesting of primarily grade 10 students. More information on the students tested as part of this requirement, and on their performance, is available in Chapter 2.

Purpose of the Basic Skills Program

To achieve its purpose of "identifying students who have not achieved mastery of basic skills," the program uses test questions that are easy for most students of average and above-average skill; they discriminate between students who have mastered basic skills and those who have not. The tests do not distinguish more finely among levels of basic skills competence.

Virtually all students in grades 3, 6 and 9 are tested. Exemptions are limited to

- students who are incapable of performing ordinary class work in English as determined by the English Language Proficiency Assessment and who have been enrolled in transitional bilingual education programs for fewer than three full years, unless a written request was submitted by the parent that the student be tested;
- special education students if exemptions were requested by the parent either in writing or as part of the TEAM process.

The number of students who were eligible for and exempt from testing in October 1988 is summarized in tables included on pages 4 through 9.

Test Development and Administration

All questions used in the Massachusetts Basic Skills Tests were developed for the program. Objectives were established during 1986-87, based on the advice of committees of teachers and curriculum specialists and results of a school survey. A large pool of possible test questions that measure those objectives was field tested by students in Massachusetts at three different times. From that pool, each year's Basic Skills tests are constructed by selecting test questions that cover the range of objectives and meet the difficulty level established by the Board of Education. All tests have been reviewed by an equity concerns committee to insure that they are fair to students of all backgrounds.

Grade 10 students tested this year followed the same schedule and administration procedures and used the same materials as grade 9 students. The results of the grade 10 tests were reported on the student level. Their results are not aggregated for schools or districts, however, because retesting affects primarily individual students. Because of the difficulty of tracking a population of students in the state from year to year, any attempt to provide aggregate or comparative statistics between years or classes could lead to inaccurate and misleading comparisons. More information about this issue is provided in Chapter 2.

Reporting of Results

Basic Skills test results are reported in two primary ways: individual student reports, the focus of the program, are sent to schools and districts in January following testing; aggregate school and district reports are provided in March.

Chapter 188 allows local school districts to set standards higher than those established by the Board. Typically, higher local standards have been officially used by a small number of districts. For 1987 and 1988, the following numbers of districts selected higher standards as shown:

Standard	Number of Districts, 1987	Number of Districts, 1988
70%	14	11
75%	4	4
80%	7	5

Twelve districts set local standards in both 1987 and 1988. Thirteen districts who set local standards in 1987 chose not to do so in 1988. Eight districts set local standards for 1988 only.

Uses of Test Results

The purpose and design of the Basic Skills Testing Program affords differing interpretations of test results, depending on the extent of basic skills problems in any school or district. Most school districts in Massachusetts have a large percentage of students who pass all Basic Skills tests and a very small number who do not. In these districts, the most appropriate response to the results occurs on a case-by-case basis. Non-passing students are evaluated individually and appropriate modifications made to their programs if necessary.

Some schools and districts have a more extensive problem with their students' basic skills mastery. These districts have a relatively small percentage of students passing the tests and substantially larger numbers of students who fail. In some of these situations, it may be appropriate to consider programmatic rather than individual responses to Basic Skills results.

Other factors affecting the interpretation of Basic Skills information are the grade levels tested and the time of testing in October of each school year. In some instances, students had been enrolled in a school for no more than a month at the time they were tested. At least for these schools, attempting to relate test results to an evaluation of the school's program would be inappropriate.

For example, vocational schools' results are based on testing students who had been previously enrolled in a number of different schools and had typically no more than two weeks of instruction at the vocational school. For these schools, the results define the extent of the basic skills problem the school must face. Any evaluation of the school's program, based on these results, would be inaccurate.

In addition, data from the past two years' tests, while comparable, can be most appropriately used in specific ways. More information about valid comparisons between years is available in Chapter 2.

The Basic Skills Testing Program helps to establish a level of achievement that all students in Massachusetts schools should attain. It represents an attempt to ensure that no student will fall below this minimum level of achievement in reading, writing and mathematics. The most legitimate use of test results supports this effort to help students.

Chapter 2:

1988 RESULTS

The following charts contain the statewide results of the 1988 Basic Skills tests. Comparable statistics are provided for grades 3, 6 and 9. Two different types of statistics are included; each type offers one perspective on students' performance. Both are useful for an improved understanding of Basic Skills results.

The first set of statistics describes the performance of eligible students on each test. Since Chapter 188 states that "the board shall annually test all students" at particular grade levels, the reporting categories account for all students that schools and districts report as enrolled. Each student reported as enrolled is accounted for in one of the following categories:

1. **Exempt** - an enrolled student who was exempted from the test in accordance with program criteria.

All other students are eligible to be tested and their results may show:

2. **Pass** - an enrolled student who scored above the statewide standard;

3. **Fail** - an enrolled student who scored below the statewide standard;

4. **Unknown** - an enrolled student who did not take the test or whose test was unscorable.

At each grade level, the results show the distribution of students in each category for each subject tested. These statistics are useful in addressing questions such as "How many sixth grade students have demonstrated mastery of basic skills in <u>each one</u> of the Basic Skills tests?"

This type of information, however, does not provide a total picture of Basic Skills performance. It does not describe how many students have demonstrated mastery of basic skills in all three subject areas. For example, if each test has a 10 percent failure rate, it is important to know whether:

- the same 10 percent of students failed all three tests;
- the 10 percent failure rate in each subject represents completely different students; or
- the true situation lies somethere between these extremes.

The second group of statistics — the number of tests passed — helps to clarify this issue, answering questions such as, "How many sixth grade students have demonstrated mastery of <u>all</u> of the basic skills?"

GRADE 3

BASIC SKILLS TEST RESULTS
1988

READING

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	61,809
Total Exemptions	4,987
Special Education	2,677
Bilingual	2,310
Eligible to be tested	56,822

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	**Percentage**
Pass	53,841	94.8%
Fail	2,711	4.8%
Unknown	270	0.5%

MATHEMATICS

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	61,809
Total Exemptions	4,768
Special Education	2,479
Bilingual	2,289
Eligible to be tested	57,041

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	**Percentage**
Pass	53,228	93.3%
Fail	3,494	6.1%
Unknown	319	0.6%

WRITING

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	61,809
Total Exemptions	5,029
Special Education	2,716
Bilingual	2,313
Eligible to be tested	56,780

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	**Percentage**
Pass	52,940	93.2%
Fail	3,117	5.5%
Unknown	723	1.3%
Blank	98	0.2%
Too Brief	77	0.1%
Off Topic	229	0.4%

Passed Tests		
	Number	**Percentage**
Passed all 3 tests	49,567	87.5%
Passed 2 tests	4,658	8.2%
Passed 1 test	1,533	2.7%
Passed 0 tests	919	1.6%

- Passing rates on the grade 3 tests ranged from 93.2% to 94.8%.
- 12.5% of the students did not pass one or more tests.

GRADE 6

BASIC SKILLS TEST RESULTS
1988

READING

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	57,866
Total Exemptions	4,012
Special Education	2,851
Bilingual	1,161
Eligible to be tested	53,854

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	**Percentage**
Pass	46,976	87.2%
Fail	6,474	12.0%
Unknown	404	0.8%

MATHEMATICS

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	57,866
Total Exemptions	3,934
Special Education	2,794
Bilingual	1,140
Eligible to be tested	53,932

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	**Percentage**
Pass	49,563	91.9%
Fail	3,925	7.3%
Unknown	444	0.8%

WRITING

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	57,866
Total Exemptions	4,089
Special Education	2,926
Bilingual	1,163
Eligible to be tested	53,777

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	**Percentage**
Pass	50,447	93.8%
Fail	2,507	4.7%
Unknown	823	1.5%
Blank	239	0.4%
Too Brief	144	0.3%
Off Topic	122	0.2%
No Final Draft	14	0.0%

Passed Tests		
	Number	**Percentage**
Passed all 3 tests	44,412	82.8%
Passed 2 tests	5,391	10.0%
Passed 1 test	2,571	4.8%
Passed 0 tests	1,274	2.4%

- Passing rates on the grade 6 tests ranged from 87.2% to 93.8%; passing rates were highest in writing and lowest in reading.

- 17.2% of the students did not pass one or more tests.

GRADE 9

BASIC SKILLS TEST RESULTS
1988

READING

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	61,766
Total Exemptions	4,570
Special Education	2,780
Bilingual	1,790
Eligible to be tested	57,196

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	**Percentage**
Pass	48,882	85.5%
Fail	6,092	10.7%
Unknown	2,222	3.9%

MATHEMATICS

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	61,766
Total Exemptions	4,564
Special Education	2,773
Bilingual	1,791
Eligible to be tested	57,202

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	**Percentage**
Pass	48,921	85.5%
Fail	5,863	10.2%
Unknown	2,418	4.2%

WRITING

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	61,766
Total Exemptions	4,634
Special Education	2,824
Bilingual	1,810
Eligible to be tested	57,132

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	**Percentage**
Pass	51,428	90.0%
Fail	2,670	4.7%
Unknown	3,034	5.3%
Blank	792	1.4%
Too Brief	68	0.1%
Off Topic	157	0.3%
No Final Draft	25	0.0%

Passed Tests		
	Number	**Percentage**
Passed all 3 tests	44,801	78.6%
Passed 2 tests	5,648	9.9%
Passed 1 test	3,204	5.6%
Passed 0 tests	3,347	5.9%

- Passing rates on the grade 9 tests ranged from 85.5% to 90.0%; passing rates were highest in writing.

- 21.4% of the students did not pass one or more tests.

Two-Year Summary

A major goal of the Basic Skills Testing Program is to help ensure that all students achieve mastery of basic skills. One way to determine if progress toward that goal is being made is to compare the results of the annual Basic Skills tests to see if the numbers and percentages of students performing below the state standard are declining. The 1988 Basic Skills tests were designed to be as comparable as possible to the tests administered in 1987 and, thus, allow analysis of this type to be performed.

However, several cautions are necessary:

1. Any comparison of results from two different admininstrations of a test must consider whether the tested populations are the same. If the populations are different, any changes in the results may be related to this difference rather than to differences in achievement.
2. In a practical sense, any change in numbers or percentages between the two years of Basic Skills results means that fewer or more students have been identified as lacking mastery of basic skills. However, small changes from year to year are not statistically significant unless the scores represent a large number of students. For example, for a change from a passing rate of 84 percent to one of 83 percent to be significant, the scores must represent well over 10,000 students.
3. A number of unmeasurable factors, such as differences in test administration or student motivation, may affect test scores from year to year.

The chart below summarizes the 1987 and 1988 results. These data show that

- in all but one instance (grade 9 mathematics), passing rates have improved compared to the 1987 results.
- passing rates improved the most in writing.
- in all instances, exemptions have increased over the 1987 figures.
- at grade 9, the percentage of students eligible but not tested increased.

1987 and 1988 RESULTS

	GRADE 3		GRADE 6		GRADE 9	
	1987	1988	1987	1988	1987	1988
READING						
EXEMPT	7.2%	8.0%	6.3%	6.9%	6.3%	7.3%
PASS	93.1%	94.8%	86.2%	87.2%	83.8%	85.5%
FAIL	6.5%	4.8%	12.9%	12.0%	12.6%	10.7%
UNKNOWN	0.4%	0.5%	0.8%	0.8%	3.6%	3.9%
MATHEMATICS						
EXEMPT	6.9%	7.7%	6.2%	6.8%	6.2%	7.4%
PASS	93.3%	93.3%	90.8%	91.9%	85.9%	85.5%
FAIL	6.2%	6.1%	8.2%	7.3%	10.1%	10.2%
UNKNOWN	0.5%	0.6%	1.0%	0.8%	4.0%	4.2%
WRITING						
EXEMPT	7.3%	8.1%	6.4%	7.1%	6.3%	7.5%
PASS	91.4%	93.2%	89.1%	93.8%	87.4%	90.0%
FAIL	7.5%	5.5%	9.3%	4.7%	7.3%	4.7%
UNKNOWN	1.2%	1.3%	1.6%	1.5%	5.3%	5.3%
TESTS PASSED						
PASSED 3	85.3%	87.5%	79.1%	82.8%	76.3%	78.6%
PASSED 2	9.3%	8.2%	11.8%	10.0%	11.0%	9.9%
PASSED 1	3.4%	2.7%	5.7%	4.8%	6.4%	5.6%
PASSED 0	2.0%	1.6%	3.4%	2.4%	6.3%	5.9%

Comparison of the tested population - 1987 and 1988

In 1988 the total enrollment in the three grades tested increased by just over 2200 students. Increases occurred at both grades 3 and 6; grade 9 enrollment declined by more than 1800 students. The 1988 population, therefore, has a slightly different distribution across the grades tested than existed in 1987.

The percentage of the total enrollment that was exempted from testing (about 8 percent of the enrollment) increased in all subjects at all grade levels. Both special education and bilingual exemptions increased, although the pattern was different at each grade level.

At grade 3, bilingual exemptions increased at a substantially greater rate (23 percent increase in the rate as compared to 2 percent) than did special education exemptions. At grade 6, both bilingual and special education exemptions increased by about 10 percent. The rate of increase in exemptions was highest at grade 9 with the increase in the bilingual exemption rate averaging about three times that of the special education increase.

A higher exemption rate does not necessarily mean that the population tested in 1988 is different from 1987. If the increased enrollment represented a high percentage of students eligible for exemption, the group of students eligible for testing in 1988 may not differ substantially from those tested in 1987.

Comparison of performance - 1987 and 1988

In general, this comparison indicates that in 1988 both the number and percentage of students who failed at least one Basic Skills test has decreased. This year, 17.2 percent of the students (28,500) at grades 3, 6 and 9 did not meet the state standard in at least one area; in 1987, almost 20 percent of all students (33,000) did not pass one or more tests.

The 1988 population has fewer ninth grade students and since grade 9 passing rates tend to be lower, the overall passing rate should be higher in 1988 even if there were no improvement in performance at each grade level. However, passing rates at each grade level are higher than in 1987.

As indicated above, the percentage of students exempted is higher in 1988 than in 1987. Since passing rates increased in almost all areas, it is reasonable to consider whether the increase in the passing rates is related to the increase in exemptions.

Although it is impossible to provide a definitive answer to this question, the data do provide a number of insights. First, the percentage increase in the passing rate is larger than the percentage increase in the exemption rate. Assuming that students who are exempted are more likely to fail the tests, the larger increase in the passing rates indicates that a small increase in performance occurred beyond what would be expected with a higher exemption rate.

An alternative approach to addressing this issue would be to determine what percentage of the total enrollment at each grade level passed all three tests. Passing percentages are typically computed on the total enrollment minus exemptions; however, assuming again that exempted students may well have difficulty passing the tests, this approach seems reasonable.

This analysis shows that at grades 3 and 9 the percentage of the total enrollment that passed all three Basic Skills tests increased by about 1 percent in 1988. At grade 6, this percentage increased by almost 2 percent.

PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ENROLLMENT PASSING ALL THREE TESTS

	1987	1988
GRADE 3	78.9%	80.2%
GRADE 6	73.8%	76.8%
GRADE 9	71.3%	72.5%

Tenth Grade Testing

Another perspective on the extent of basic skills mastery among Massachusetts students comes from the retesting of students who did not meet state standards in 1987. The Regulations for the Massachusetts Testing Program require that all ninth grade students who do not meet state standards on the Basic Skills test(s) must continue to take the test(s) until the standards are met. Since a state standard was established for the 1987 administration, any student who was or would have been a ninth grader in October 1987 and who did not meet the state standard was required to take the Basic Skills tests as appropropriate last October.

Two categories of students were included in this testing:

- Students who were enrolled as ninth graders in October 1987 in a Massachusetts public school and did not meet the state standard on the tests. These students could have taken the test and failed or could have been eligible and not tested in 1987 (unknown).
- Students who transferred into a Massachusetts public school from another state or from a Massachusetts private school after October 1987, but who would have been eligible to be tested if they had been enrolled at the time of testing (i.e., a ninth grade student who was not exempted).

Approximately 14,000 grade 9 students did not pass one or more tests last year and were required to be retested in the area in which they did not meet state standards. Some of those students are no longer enrolled in a Massachusetts public high school; some may now be exempt from testing. Schools were not asked to report the enrollment status of each of the students required to be tested. The difficulties of tracking students across the state make such an attempt impossible.

Schools were asked to account for their current tenth grade enrollment in the same way as they do their ninth grade enrollment. It is possible to describe how many current tenth grade students have not met state standards in at least one area. Some of these students did not pass the tests last year and some are transfer students enrolled since October 1987.

The following chart summarizes the results for students tested in 1988 who were not part of the regular ninth grade testing.

Number of students tested	10,870
Students not passing one or more tests	4,821

This number represents approximately 8 percent of the grade 10 enrollment.

Chapter 3:

STUDENTS AT RISK

The Basic Skills Testing Program helps to ensure that all students in the state can read, compute and write at a minimum level of performance. Specifically, the testing program establishes a minimum standard of performance in three basic skills areas, and identifies students who cannot perform at this level. The inability to read, write or compute at least this well certainly suggests that a student may be at high risk of school failure.

Approximately 28,500 students in grades 3, 6 and 9 did not meet the state standard in at least one of the Basic Skills tests. Each of these students needs an appropriate response at the school level to help the student acquire the skills necesssary for successful participation in the classroom.

In addition to a local response to the needs of each individual student, it is important, at the state level, to examine who these 28,500 students are to determine whether any systematic patterns in non-passing rates exist, and to consider the equity implications of any patterns that do occur.

If passing the tests were equally likely for each student, passing rates would be similar among all groups of students. Further, each school and district would have a similar percentage of students, representing a small number, who need help in mastering basic skills.

The results clearly show that this equality does not exist.

1. **The 28,500 students who did not pass one or more Basic Skills tests are not distributed equally among schools and districts.**
2. **Groups of students with particular demographic characteristics have substantially lower passing rates.**

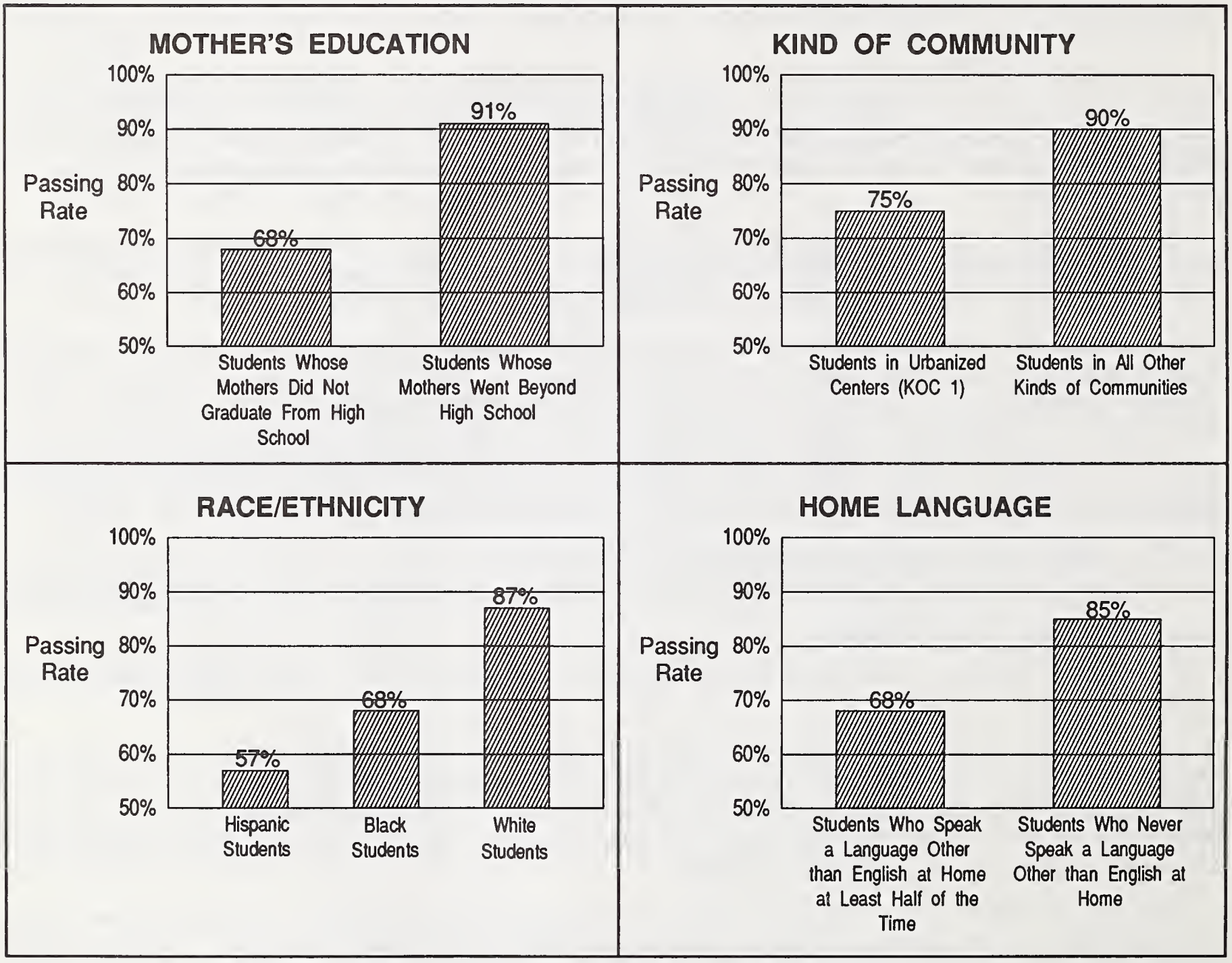
First, schools and districts do not have similar passing rates. For example, more than 70 percent of the districts have passing rates above the state average of 83 percent, while 7 percent of the districts have passing rates of 60 percent or lower. Thus, a small number of schools face a substantial problem in ensuring basic skills mastery for each of their students, while, in the vast majority of schools, basic skills mastery has been achieved by all but a few students.

Second, the results show that certain student demographic characteristics — primarily those related to disadvantage — are consistently linked with higher failure rates on Basic Skills tests. The chart below compares the demographic characteristics of students who passed all three tests with the characteristics of the 28,500 students who did not pass one or more of the Basic Skills tests.

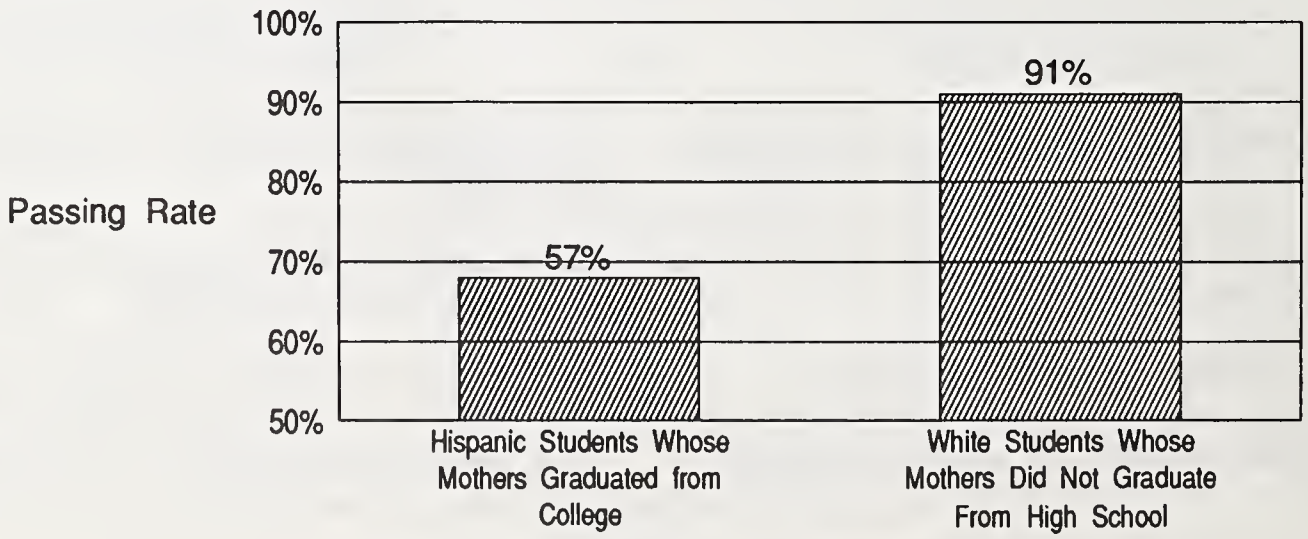
STUDENTS WHO PASSED ALL THREE TESTS	STUDENTS WHO DID NOT PASS ONE OR MORE TESTS
6.3 percent have mothers with less than a high school education	12.2 percent have mothers with less than a high school education
6 percent speak a language other than English in the home most of the time	13.9 prcent speak a language other than English in the home most of the time
8.1 percent are Black or Hispanic students	22.4 percent are Black or Hispanic students
33.4 percent attend school in urban communities	53.8 percent attend school in urban communities

This disproportionate representation of particular groups of students in the population of students not passing one or more tests identifies a number of factors that are related to lower basic skills performance.

Correspondingly, the passing rates for students with these demographic characteristics are substantially lower than for students who do not have them. The following graphs illustrate the differences when some of the demographic characteristics are considered in isolation:

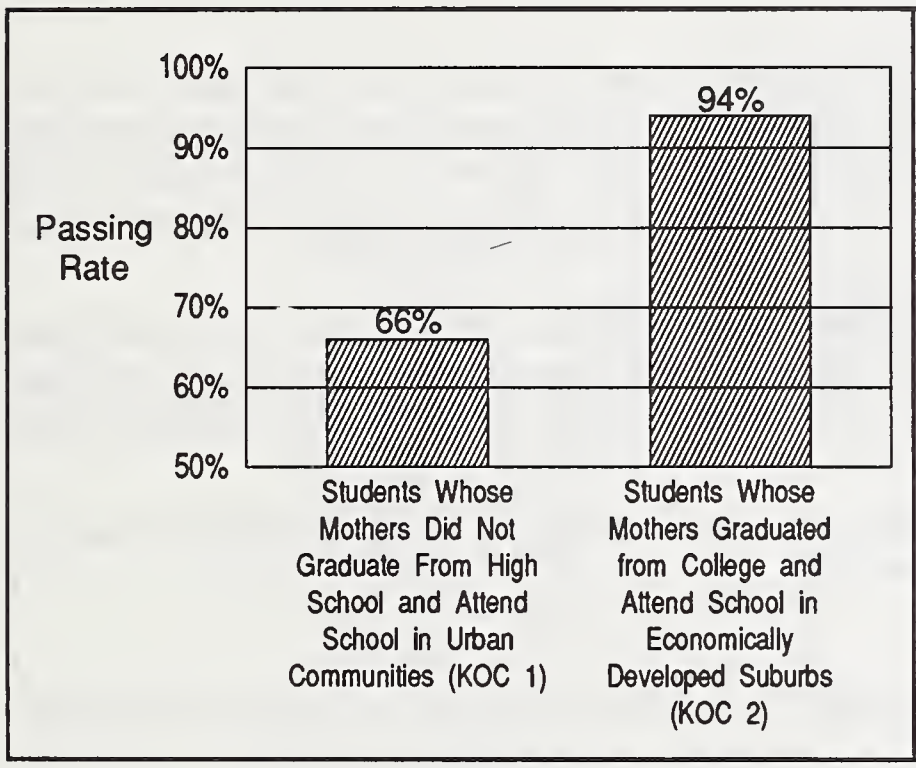


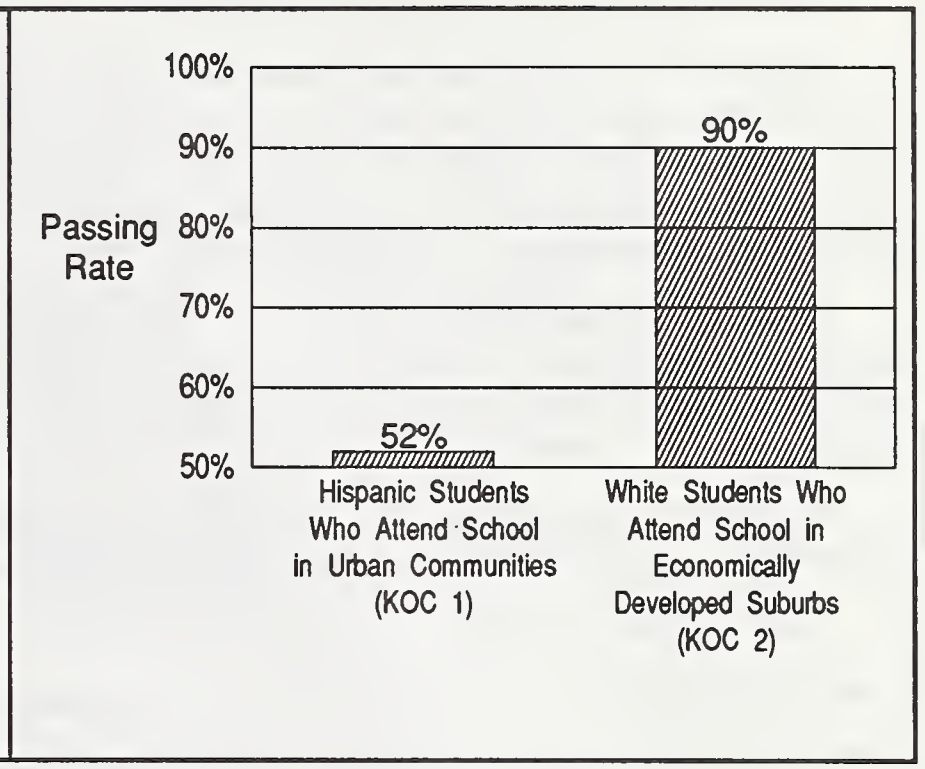
The effect of some of these characteristics can be considerable.



The interrelationship of these factors — and the disadvantage each represents — and their association with performance on Basic Skills tests is complex. Very likely, association with other factors defining economic disadvantage — unemployment rates, for example — is also an important consideration.

Obviously many of these characteristics often exist in combination. The Basic Skills results show that when students are characterized by a combination of these factors, the differences can be even more substantial. For example,





Perhaps most important is the fact that these characteristics tend to be clustered in relatively small groups of students and schools. Many students who have one of these characteristics are likely to have one or more of the others.

Further, students with one or more of these characteristics often attend the same schools. For example, at grade 6, 32 of the schools (4.7 percent) enroll 50 percent of the students reported as being limited or non-English speaking. Fifty percent of the Black students at grade 6 attend 28 schools.

Any interpretation of the Basic Skills results must take this clustering into consideration. For example, the results indicate that students who attend urban schools have lower passing rates than do students in schools in other kinds of communities. In order to understand the implications of this result, it is important to consider the following:

At grade 6,

- 2/3 of the students whose mothers have less than a high school education attend school in urban (KOC 1) communities;
- 82 percent of Black and Hispanic students go to school in KOC 1 communities;
- 69 percent of Hispanic students speak a language other than English at home more than one-half of the time.

It has been a persistent finding of any analysis of Basic Skills results (including those from the Basic Skills Improvement Policy, the precursor to the current program) that disadvantaged students continue to have difficulty, as a group, mastering basic skills. Without at least this level of mastery of basic skills, students who bring substantial disadvantage to the classroom are likely to continue to experience school failure disproportionately. Further, schools with more students who are disadvantaged are likely to have more students who experience school failure.

A discussion of the Opportunity Schools can illustrate these findings. Chapter 727 of the Acts of 1987 established a program designed to assist schools serving large numbers of at-risk students. A group of

schools — Opportunity Schools — were identified on the basis of performance on the 1987 Basic Skills Tests and targeted for special attention.

The statute outlined a number of steps that each targeted school would undertake:

1. Expand the School Improvement Council to include a representative from outside the school.
2. Develop a school plan focussed on school improvement.
3. Submit annual reports on the school's progress.

Schools were identified as Opportunity Schools if their performance on the 1987 Basic Skills tests was in the bottom quarter of all schools on all three of the tests at a particular grade level. Because the statute defines Opportunity Schools as elementary, middle and junior high schools, only a very few schools were eligible on the basis of their ninth grade test results. All but four of the Opportunity Schools are schools containing either grade 3 or grade 6 (or both).

Selecting schools on the basis of a single measure may not identify the schools with the overall most challenging problems. However, as the data below will show, the Opportunity Schools serve students with substantial disadvantage, and improving basic skills mastery likely is not the only challenge these schools face.

Students in Opportunity Schools display a demographic profile that is dramatically different from that of students in other public schools in the Commonwealth.

For example, students in Opportunity Schools

- are three times more likely to have a language other than English spoken at home at all times;
- are two times more likely to have mothers who have never completed high school.

A majority of students in Opportunity Schools

- did not attend pre-school;
- do not have computers at home;
- are minority students.

Among students in non-Opportunity Schools, only 12 percent are minority students, more than 60 percent have some kind of computer at home and almost 70 percent attended pre-school.

Further, 97 percent of these students are in schools in urban communities.

Correspondingly, the Basic Skills results parallel the pattern shown in the analysis above. Over one-third of the students in Opportunity Schools did not pass one or more tests. While this percentage is smaller than in 1987, the rate continues to be more than double that of students in other schools. These students constitute 25 percent of all students who did not pass one or more tests, but only 11 percent of the total enrollment.

Opportunity Schools and the students who attend them clearly illustrate the relationship between certain elements of socioeconomic disadvantage and one element of educational disadvantage — mastery of basic skills. The strength of this relationship and its likely similarity to other educational measures define a substantial challenge for the Opportunity School Program and for other schools whose students have similar characteristics.

MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION REGIONAL CENTERS

Marcy Devanney
Northwest Regional Center
Berkshire Plaza
37 Main Street
North Adams, MA 01248
413/664-7101

Laurie Slobody
Central Mass. Regional Center
Beaman Street, Route 140
West Boylston, MA 01853
508/835-6266

Paul Burnim
Greater Springfield Regional Center
Macek Drive
Chicopee, MA 01013
413/594-8511

Peter Cirioni
Greater Boston Regional Center
75 Acton Street
Arlington, MA 02174
617/641-4870

Amy Sosman
Northeast Regional Center
Jefferson Office Park
790 Turnpike St.
North Andover, MA 01845
508/689-0164 or 617/727-0600

Pat O'Brien
Southeast Regional Center
P.O. Box 29
Middleboro, MA 02346
508/947-1231

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